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Additional Addressees:
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CC:
AMEMBASSY PRISTINA
AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO
AMEMBASSY ZAGREB

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION TO VPOTUS VISIT TO SERBIA

SUMMARY

Serbian electronic and print media extensively covered the May 20 visit of Vice President Joseph Biden to Belgrade. News reports were straightforward and predominately positive. Pre-arrival press pieces reported that the U.S. seeks to "press the reset button" with Serbia and that Biden's visit to Belgrade represents a "new stage" in U.S.-Serbia relations. Though there was early speculation about U.S. motives, media and political analysts generated a relatively positive and tolerant atmosphere. The public sphere was dominated by the message that America and Serbia "agree to disagree over Kosovo" but that there are many issues other than Kosovo on which America and Serbia can successfully cooperate, and the U.S. supports Serbia's accelerated accession to the EU. The post-visit media environment was saturated with future-oriented messages reflecting basic principles underpinning "new relations" with Serbia: 1) "the U.S. strongly support Serbian membership in the European Union - the U.S. will use its influence, energy, and resources to promote Serbia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations," 2)"the U.S. does not expect Serbia to recognize the independence of Kosovo."

MAY 20TH VPOTUS VISIT - MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

May 21 Headlines: "Beta: Biden - U.S. Wants to Deepen Cooperation with Serbia," Politika: "Serbia and the U.S.: a New Start;" Danas: "U.S. Ready to Accelerate Serbia's European Path;" Vecernje Novosti: "Serbia's Road to Europe Opened;" Blic: "Kosovo is not an Obstacle for EU Membership;" Press: "New deal;" Kurir: "Friendly;" Glas Javnosti: "Serbia Does not Need to Recognize Kosovo."

BILATERAL AND POLITICAL RELATIONS: On Wednesday, May 20, TV stations with national coverage B92, FOX and RTS broadcast special programs on the visit and carried live statements by VP Biden and President Tadic after their meeting. The media noted that President Tadic and VP Biden announced the opening of "a new phase" in Serbia - U.S. relations, despite disagreement over the issue of Kosovo, and agreed that Serbia's future is in the European Union.

ECONOMIC RELATIONS: The press carried a press release from Prime Minister Cvetkovic's office stating that Biden and Cvetkovic agreed that it is necessary to further intensify economic cooperation, boost investments, and promote U.S. - Serbian trade. The media noted that Biden and Cvetkovic concluded that the U.S. is one of the major foreign investors in Serbia and that in the past eight years the U.S. economy has invested over one billion dollars into Serbia.

MILITARY: Defense Minister Sutanovac told media that VP Biden's visit to his Ministry and the Serbian Army was an expression of his respect for the Serbian Army and reforms carried out by the Defense Ministry. Minister Sutanovac also said that he and VP Biden agreed that military cooperation is fundamental for bilateral relations and that it should continue to be fostered in the future, as well as cooperation within Partnership for Peace. In a B92 interview, Sutanovac said the Vice President indicated the doors to NATO membership are open but that it is up to Serbia to decide.

SCHEDULE & SECURITY MEASURES: Media also carried extensive coverage of security measures and schedule details, even including the menu at the Tadic dinner. Citing unofficial information, RTS reported that Serbian Security Services engaged approximately 3,500 people

for Biden's protection. Media carried details of street closings and appeals by Serbian authorities to show understanding for all the resulting inconvenience. Despite the tight security measures, the majority of media outlets, including Belgrade City TV Studio B, reported that transportation Belgrade did not collapse and that citizens behaved in accordance with instructions issued by authorities.

PRE-ARRIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

In an article published by the daily Politika(5/19) headlined "Biden Comes in Peace," the daily asserts that the VP is not coming to Serbia "to threaten or impose new conditions" and that Belgrade can look at it as "a significant change in the relations of two countries."

Danas daily wrote (5/19) that the VP Biden's visit to Serbia can mark the beginning of clear U.S. support for Serbia's EU integration.

In an op-ed "Hey Joe" Politika (5/17) wrote that Serbia and America have 'agreed that we disagree' over Kosovo issue, "so relations of Serbia and the U.S. will progress as much as Belgrade manage to keep the Kosovo issue separated from other topics." "Visit of the highest U.S. official after three turbulent decades is undoubtedly a chance to finally stabilize relations."

B92 (5/15) stressed that Biden will be the most senior U.S. official to visit Serbia in last 30 years. The goal of his visit is to encourage cooperation between the U.S. and Serbia, but also to warn the entire region that it must maintain stability.

Blic (5/15) published a report under the headline "America Pushes Serbia Toward the EU" which says that the U.S. supports Serbia's accelerated accession in the EU and that there are many issues other than Kosovo on which two countries can successfully cooperate.

Weekly Standard's (5/15) editor speculated that President Tadic will not be able to accommodate America's wishes due to internal political dynamics.

Several dailies (Novosti, Press, Pregled, Gradjanski List) and TV stations (B92, Pink, RTV) on May 15th carried parts of Ambassador Munter's interview given to wire service Beta. Ambassador Munter said that VB Biden's visit is a sign that the new U.S. administration is continuing a policy that aims for a successful Serbia in a successful region in Europe, but that it is also evidence of a deeper interest on the part of Washington.

Vreme (5/14) weekly published a moderately positive article, entitled "A Railway Senator." The piece details Biden's private and professional life, and presented the VP as a "people's man." Although the weekly recalled that Biden supported a policy of force and conditions against Serbia last decade, it also described him as an experienced and knowledgeable official who nurtures high moral and political principles. It refers to a Biden statement in which he referred to teachers, police officers, firefighters, hospital workers and factory workers as the "nation's heart and soul."

In an analytical piece "Chance For a Change" (5/14) Beta news agency wrote that since May 2008 elections, Tadic and his Democrats have been unable to simultaneously oppose Kosovo's independence and to improve strong ties with the West and the EU. "Biden's visit to Belgrade may be the last chance for the Serbian authorities to change their confusing policy toward the West, at the core of which lies dissatisfaction over the recognition of Kosovo's independence. If that turn fails to occur, Belgrade will probably not be able to talk with the Washington administration at such a high level for a long time to come."

Daily Politika (5/12) published an op-ed titled "Everyone Will Be Unhappy At The End." Political analyst Vukadinovic [who is close to Kostunica's DSS] speculated about the "bad timing of Biden's visit, basically because, except for "courteous smiles and protocol phrases," Washington has nothing substantial to offer to Belgrade right now and Belgrade will not be able to bend deep enough and be as "cooperative" as the Americans wish. Vukadinovic predicts that "everyone will be unhappy" after the visit. "Roman Proconsul [Biden] is visiting a traditionally disobedient, but now three-quarter pacified Judaea [Serbia]," concluded the columnist his critical overview of the VP's visit.

Weekly Standard (5/8) speculated that the main topic of Biden's visit to Belgrade will be security cooperation between the U.S and Serbia. The weekly wrote that Vice President will try to avoid the Kosovo issue and there would be no agreement by the U.S. or Serbia on this issue. Standard writes that Biden might suggest "a freezing of the Kosovo issue" while focusing on a number of issues which Serbia and America agree upon.

Daily Blic in early May (5/5) reported on four main agenda items for the VPOTUS visit: an agreement that would remove Kosovo as the biggest obstacle in the bilateral relationship; preserving peace and stability in the region; economic issues; and security cooperation such as gendarmerie participation in peacekeeping operations.

COMMENT

Anticipation of the visit initially generated some mixed reactions in the media. Though mainstream press highlighted the visit as an opportunity for Serbia, conservative and radical commentators personalized the Vice President negatively as the main sponsor of the 1999 NATO bombing. As we approached the visit itself, however, the message dominated that the Obama-Biden administration plans to deepen U.S. cooperation with Serbia and that Washington strongly supports Serbia's EU membership. On the whole, press coverage was positive to a degree that has not been seen in Serbia in many years.

MUNTER